
Title: Matt's Tale Vol. II

Author: Madd Matt

Quickly returning over the
old bridge, the young
woman crossed the road,
scampered down the
embankment and swiftly
entered the dense forest.
She walked a meandering
path back to what she
knew as home, gathering
fresh roots and mosses
as she traveled. Those
who had raised her
taught her that the
fresher her reagents, the
greater the effect they
would have. Stooping in a
patch of nightshade, she
was startled by a clicking
and ticking coming from a
bramble up ahead.
Lowering herself closer to
the ground, she peered
through the underbrush to
discover a large, bizarre
insect tearing at a
rotten log with its large
scythe-like appendages.
The beast would shread
the wood, then pick
through it to separate
out the bluish fungus
that grew in the
moldering pith. After the
fungus was sifted out, it
was briefly mouthed, as
if to test for quality,
then stored away in the
folds of the giant's rigid,
black skin that shone like
highly polished shadow
armour. In the distance,
she could see another of
the curiosities ripping at
a small bush as if it had
committed some great
wrong to the creature.
The closer insect paused
from its toil to gently

pull and clean its long antennae with its intimidating front claws. The sight of such a delicate task by such an ungainly brute made her giggle, which was a sound that was misplaced in these deep woods and to the great insect. The monster raised up and looked in her direction, moving its head from side to side to aid in detecting any motion in the brush. The mage snorted and scurried through the leaves on hands and knees, pushed through the brambles up a berm and tumbled down the other side of the incline, coming to rest at a line of houses that she recognized.

Darting between the buildings, taking time to hide and look back, the girl came to a line of quaint houses. Dashing past the gleaming marble home, she noisily clomped up the steps of the neighboring log cabin. She hastily waved to the vendors next door who responded with their usual vulgarities. Smiling, she returned an improper gesture, unlatched the door to the cabin, rushed inside and slammed the door behind her.

"M'lord? M'lord!" she called out.

Maxim, heir to the House of Spur, hunched over a small writing desk. A thin thread of blue smoke snaked from a pipe nestled in the side of his mouth, fragranting the room with the odor of damp tabacco and cherries.

"Virginia, must you always slam the door? Tull

worked most of yesterday repairing your last damage." Without moving he continued, "These scrolls you have brought me from the Lost Lands contain a great deal of knowledge. I have been reading them most of the morn and have yet to absorb it all." Turning slightly to face her, he was taken aback by her disheveled clothes and the mud and scratches on her face. Sighing, he groaned, "Where and what have you been up to this time? Wrestling with orcs again?"

"Big bugs!" she pipped, bouncing on the balls of her feet "Big black bugs!" Maxim stood slowly, wondering if the creaking he heard was the aged furniture that had been under him, or his own bones. He walked towards Virginia, leaned foward and sniffed at her face for the hint of liquor, only to recoil from the stench of her well garliced breath.

"I've not been a'drinking, m'lord. There are truly grand insects about in my woods!" she huffed.

Pondering, Maxim replied, "Yes, of course. I should not be surprised in this curse'd land. We drive the Juka out only to have them replaced by abominations. I swear we should have taken task against the Meer rather than the Juka. At the least, the Juka are not clumsy magicians." He lifted a heavy pack from the floor and slung it to his sholder. "Very well then. I will look into this. I have business to tend to in Trammel. You, on

the other hand, have
another order of scrolls
to inscribe," his reminder
bringing a frown to
Virginia's face. "After I
have consulted with my
salespeople, I will take in
a hunt and see what is
about. My prized Troy
has not been out for a
run as of late, the
outing will be good for
his heart. Open one of
your gates to the stable
for me, as you know how
the use of runes effects
me."

Virginia walked in a slow
circle. Soon a faint mist
began to follow her
steps. Whispering, she
tighten the circuit she
paced, the trailing mist
thickened and then
suddenly yawned into a
cleft of time and space.
Maxim paused before
entering the gate.

"I shall return in a few
days. Once your work is
complete, you may
investigate your odd
findings. Please, for once,
take great care." He
stepped into the portal
and was gone, a spiral of
mist left where there
had been a man.

Virginia sat at the desk
that Maxim had recently
vacated and reluctantly
took up her scribe's pen.
Stretching foward, she
swung open the shutters
of the nearby window.
Straining her eyes, she
looked deep into the
treeline. If she held her
breath still, should could
make out the clicking and
ticking she heard before,
and if she gazed long
enough, she believed she
could see the glint of
sunlight off of what
seemed so much like
highly polished shadow

armour.

The smooth, hand-rubbed
Yew wood made nary a
creak as it flexed under
the increasing tension.
The braided gut cord
twisted and stretched
taut as frayed strips of
leather woven into the
strand fluttered in the
morning breeze. Arrow
nock, angled bowstring and
gloved fingers moved in
unison and came to rest
on the exact same
location on the archer's
cheek that they had set
so many thousands of
times before. Shoulder
and arm joints locked
into position, muscles
tightened and ceased their
stressed twitching, a last
breathe was slowly
exhaled, the mental image
of target and arrow as
one became clear; for a
brief, fleeting moment all
things were calm and
there arose a feeling of
perfect peace.

The arrow leaping from
the bow suprised Maxim
of Spur, as it should
when his release was
flawless. The absence of
conscious effort and the
minimum of physical
movement would insure a
straight and true flight.
The arrow planed upwards
slightly, then settled into
a gradual trajectory as
it coursed down range
and struck the great
insect in the midsection
with a hollow thud.
The wounded solen bolted
a full three meters
straight up and landed,
stumbling, on its four
hind legs. The creature
took a few clumsy steps
forward and clawed at
the air with its front
legs as if to defend
against some unseen
attacker. "The arrow has

lodged well in the vitals,"
he thought to himself.
Maxim quickly nocked,
drew and loosed three
more arrows, striking the
huge ant in the same
area as the first bolt.
The mortally injured solen
staggered ahead, sudded
and collapsed into the
underbrush. Spur
cautiously rode up to the
kill, noticing that the
fluid that spilled from
the carcass sizzled as it
ate into the forest floor.

See next book